Situation Report: Ukraine's Pentagon Cleans House

Expéditeur : FP's Jack Detsch and Amy Mackinnon (situationreport@foreignpolicy.com)
À : k.alahassa123@yahoo.fr
Date : jeudi 21 septembre 2023 à 20:30 UTC

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Situation Report

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SEPTEMBER 21, 2023 | VIEW IN BROWSER | SUBSCRIBE

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By Jack Detsch and Amy Mackinnon, with Rishi Iyengar

Welcome back to *Foreign Policy*'s SitRep! Jack and FP's Amy Mackinnon, with an all-star guest appearance from tech pal Rishi Iyengar. Our air tag on Robbie has run out of battery, but his last known whereabouts were somewhere on the West Coast. While Jack tries to locate his mind after a trip back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean to

the Ukraine Defense Contact Group in Germany, here's a picture of a cute Ukrainian cat getting a military award.

Alright, here's what's on tap for the day: **Ukraine's new defense boss** faces a steep learning curve, the Democratic-led Senate begins to crack **Tommy Tuberville's hold** on military nominees, and the Pentagon puts its chips…err, **computer chips**…on the table.

Have feedback? Hit reply to let us know your thoughts.

Graded on a curve

Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustem Umerov arrives to give a statement at Ramstein Air Base in Germany after a Ukraine Defense Contact Group meeting on Sept. 19. *AFP via Getty Images*

The first 14 Ukraine Defense Contact Group meetings were like a family affair. If the meeting was in person, as most of them were, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin would greet his Ukrainian counterpart, Oleksii Reznikov, with a massive bear hug. The U.S. defense chief even pronounced Reznikov's name correctly in his public remarks. Then the delegates from 50-plus countries, whether they were at NATO headquarters or at Ramstein Air Base, would sit down and agree to pledge a major new weapons system to Ukraine, whether artillery, long-range rockets, air defenses, or tanks.

Bear-ly there. When the 54-nation contact group gathered at Ramstein on Tuesday, Reznikov was gone, fired because Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said the defense ministry needed "new approaches" to the military and Ukrainian society (some see the roundabout reasoning as a sign that Reznikov was ensnared in a wider anti-corruption crackdown). The new Ukrainian defense minister did not get a bear hug from Austin. The U.S. defense chief stumbled over the pronunciation of his name. He asked for more of everything, U.S. officials in the room said. He came away with nothing new.

Out of the shadows. A Muslim of Crimean Tatar origin who studied in the United States as a teenager through a State Department program, Ruslan Umerov is relatively obscure in Washington, Brussels, and the European capitals that he will get to know well in the coming months, but casts a figure in Kyiv. He's from a party that used to be run by one of Ukraine's biggest rock stars, and authored more than 100 bills in the country's parliament—known as the Verkovna Rada—before becoming a key advisor to Zelensky, touting his Ukraine "peace formula," and attending summits on Zelensky's behalf in Saudi Arabia. He's even on a first-name basis with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Getting the house in order. But taking over an agency that has gotten nearly eight times its budget in U.S. military aid in the past 18 months—in the middle of the biggest war on the European continent in a generation—is going to be a bigger challenge than any of those things put together. Umerov doesn't have any scandals on his track record, whereas

Reznikov's diplomatically successful tenure was marred by allegations that the Ministry of Defense paid inflated prices for food and clothes for the troops, said Yehor Cherniev, a Ukrainian lawmaker who serves on the national security committee.

"We were faced with the explosive growth of our Army," said Cherniev. "You had to find, for example, hundreds of thousands of clothes for soldiers in just two months. So of course, you tried to buy everything you could, despite the price."

Fast starter. Umerov made his mark just before the meeting in Germany, dismissing seven of Ukraine's eight deputy defense ministers in a sweeping personnel move. But he's stepping in at a time when exposés have revealed that the ministry is still being gouged. Mykola Bielieskov, a research fellow at the National Institute for Strategic Studies, said the new minister will have to fix nagging personnel issues, improve the Ukrainian military draft, and provide better treatment of wounded troops who are leaving the army.

"The magnitude of the challenge is quite great for the new defense chief," said Bielieskov. "It's quite a high bar. Umerov will have a steep learning curve. People expect better resource management."

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Let's Get Personnel

The Senate confirmed Air Force Gen. **Charles Q. Brown** to be the next chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the top U.S. military advisor to the president, with Senate Majority Leader **Chuck Schumer** (D-N.Y.) moving in to advance his nomination individually along with that of the nominees to lead two other services, Marine Corps Commandant pick Gen. **Eric Smith** and Army Chief of Staff choice Gen. **Randy George**.

The Pentagon drama on Capitol Hill isn't over, though. Sen. **Tommy Tuberville** (R-Ala.) is still holding up more than 300 military nominees

over the Pentagon's policy to finance travel for U.S. service members to seek abortions across state lines.

Penny Pritzker is Biden's new special representative for Ukraine's Economic Recovery. A powerhouse Obama fundraiser, the businesswoman served as secretary of the Commerce Department from 2013 to 2017.

Alec Johnson is the National Security Council's new legislative affairs director. Johnson worked for Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.) for a decade, most recently as a senior defense policy advisor.

On the Button

What should be high on your radar, if it isn't already.

The Pentagon Chips In. The Pentagon has made its first award of funds under the CHIPS and Science Act, it announced Wednesday, spreading $238 million across eight new chipmaking hubs under its Microelectronics Commons initiative. The hubs—two in California and one each in New York, Massachusetts, Ohio, North Carolina, Arizona, and Indiana—will focus on emerging technologies including artificial intelligence, 5G, quantum technology, and electromagnetic warfare. "These hubs are not just vital to American scientific manufacturing and economic competitiveness, they will also directly contribute to this

department's national defense mission," Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks said in a briefing announcing the award.

Nerds unite. Luxembourg and Estonia have joined forces to form an IT coalition to support the digital infrastructure of Ukraine's Ministry of Defense and armed forces. Seven countries, including Latvia, Lithuania, Belgium, and Denmark, participated in the group's first meeting at Ramstein this week. The much-feared cyber-Armageddon that many analysts expected would accompany Russia's invasion of Ukraine never materialized. That's in part due to Moscow's missteps, but also strong Ukrainian defenses which have been bolstered by support from foreign governments and the private sector, as FP reported last year.

Hostage math. The family of Paul Whelan, a former U.S. Marine imprisoned in Russia since 2019 on bogus espionage charges, sees a narrow window of opportunity in which to secure his release ahead of the trial of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Evan Gershkovich, who was wrongfully detained in March. Whelan has been repeatedly passed over while the U.S. has succeeded in securing the release of another former Marine, Trevor Reed, and WNBA player Brittney Griner, who were both detained after Whelan. "The Russians had realized they could hold onto Paul longer, and try to ask for something bigger for him," said Whelan's sister Elizabeth Whelan, who was in Washington last week to meet with Biden administration officials. No date has been set for Gershkovich's trial, but the Whelan family fears that negotiations to secure the reporter's release could see their brother left behind once more."Paul

will end up getting left behind again because the Russians know they can do that," said Elizabeth Whelan.

Snapshot

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky addresses the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly on Sept. 19 in New York City. Zelensky was harshly critical of Russia's actions in Ukraine including the mass kidnapping of children and the use of food shortages as a weapon against Ukraine and the global community. *Adam Gray/Getty Images*

Eye-Popping Stats

Your host jotted down a few wild figures that came up during travel to the U.S.-led Ukraine Defense Contact Group meeting at Ramstein Air Base in Germany this week.

Fighting season. Senior U.S. defense officials told *SitRep* that Ukraine has about six weeks left in the current fighting season. Ukraine has liberated more than 54 percent of Russian-occupied territory taken since the Kremlin's full-scale invasion in February 2022, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley told reporters on Tuesday.

Troop count. The U.S. Defense Department believes that about 200,000 Russian troops remain on occupied Ukrainian soil, Milley said. The top U.S. general added that Ukraine's three-month-long counteroffensive has taken longer than Kyiv's military planners initially anticipated.

Grain drain. Russian attacks on Ukrainian ports and its grain infrastructure have destroyed 280,000 tons of grain since the Kremlin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said in his opening remarks at the contact group. That's enough grain to feed 10.5 million people for a year, Austin said.

Put On Your Radar

Today: Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is in Washington to meet with U.S. President Joe Biden and Congress on the heels of his appearance at the United Nations General Assembly.

With the Republicans in control of the gavel in the House, Zelensky will not address a joint session of Congress—he'll have to settle for a speech at D.C.'s National Archives Building that houses the original Declaration of Independence and U.S. Constitution—and Ukraine's new $325 million U.S. military aid package will not include the long-range U.S. Army Tactical Missile System that Ukraine has been asking about for months.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida is also set to address the Economic Club of New York.

Monday, Sept. 25: U.N. General Assembly debate concludes. You'll have to find something else to watch, nerds. But don't look too far: The four-day International Atomic Energy Agency conference starts in Vienna on Monday.

Wednesday, Sept. 27: Republican presidential candidates gather for a second primary debate at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California. Not attending: former U.S. President Donald Trump, who enjoys a commanding lead in the polls over the rest of the field.

Quote of the Week

"Ukraine matters, Jack."

– U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin gives your humble SitRep host a lecture on the importance of American assistance to Kyiv at the close of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group on Tuesday.

"Keep calm and avoid overhyping China's AI capabilities."

– Jeffrey Ding, Assistant Professor of Political Science at George Washington University, who testified before a Senate Intelligence Committee hearing on Artificial Intelligence on Tuesday.

This Week's Most Read

- **America Prepares for a Pacific War With China It Doesn't Want** *by Zuri Linetsky*
- **The Endless Frustration of Chinese Diplomacy** *by Cindy Yu*
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